UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL
12 January 1983

New Jersey Horizons
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The lives of thousands of American servicemen were saved during World War II by German scientists who inadvertently helped the United States develop the first atomic bomb, a Rutgers University researcher has revealed.

Pamela Richards, 41, an expert in scientific communication at the state university, said the unintentional assistance came through an elaborate information flow system which helped the Allies speedup development of the bomb that obliterated Hiroshima, killed between 100,000 and 200,000 people and quickly ended the war.

''We would have fought the war against Japan longer then we did,'' said Ms. Richards, a faculty member at Rutgers for the past six years. ''Japan was not going to surrender and we would have had to send a lot of men to their deaths.''

Germany's intriguing and most unusual contribution to the American war effort took place in the early 1940s, Ms. Richards said, as scientists were working feverishly on the Manhattan Project -- the code name attached to all work on the atomic bomb between 1941 and 1945.

''For decades prior to the outbreak of the war in Europe in 1939, Germany was a leading world center of scientific research and the most important exporter of scientific books and publications to the United States,'' Ms. Richards said.

Once the war started the scientific community in this country was concerned the flow of German scholarly journals -- many of which contained the latest nuclear physics experiments -- to America would be interrupted, Ms. Richards said.

After the fall of many European nations in the spring of 1940, the importation of German journals became more difficult.

''When the State Department cut off transfer of American funds to Germany and German-held territory in 1941, the flow of journals seemed to be coming to an end,'' Ms. Richards said.

The loss would have dealt a devastatng blow to the Allies.

''Some of the articles and other data enabled American scientists to skip certain steps ... that led to the development of the atomic bomb,'' Ms. Richards said. ''The Germans split the atom years before the United States and they were ahead of us by at least five years in nuclear research.''

The problem was solved by the U.S. Office of Strategic Services - the immediate forerunner of the CIA, which established centers in Stockholm and Lisbon and ordered subscriptions to German journals which were then microfilmed and flown back to the United States.

The practice was keep secret and continued until the end of the war.

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''Our scientists were very eager to make sure we kept getting these journals,'' Ms. Richards said.

German atomic research was freely published, she said, because Hitler did not believe development of an atomic bomb would be possible until after the war. As a result, enemy scientists were unable to convince the German high command that nuclear energy could be used for defense weaponry.

''Long-term projects, such as the development of an atomic bomb, simply weren't supported and in 1942 (in Germany and) they allowed the publication of a number of papers done on nuclear work over the previous two years,'' Ms. Richards said.

''The journals allowed us to ... accelerate work on the bomb,'' the researcher explained.

''I've talked to people present (when the journals arrived in New York) and they could not believe this highly classified informaton was being released,'' she said. ''(It was so important) they had couriers go out to meet the plane and rush the microfilm in for review.''

However, The espionage operation was by no means a one-way street, Ms. Richards said. By November 1944 the Germans were almost completely cut off from foreign journals.

''The Germans were doing this to us also, but we had a clamp down on all of our nuclear physics informaton,'' Ms. Richards said. ''They were looking for other types of things, such as information on synthetic fuels and rocketry, but not nuclear.''

Late in 1944, Germany landed two spies on the coast of Maine by submarine.

''One spy actually made it to New York and ... spent days in the New York Public Library copying American journals to send back to their country,'' Ms. Richards said.

Despite the Germans somewhat incredible link to their enemy's development of the atomic bomb, Ms. Richards said, the Germans try to overlook their involvement.

''It's not terribly interesting to them now,'' she said.